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SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: THE ARMY TAKES THE LEAD

REF: A. BANGKOK 3785

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 3649

Classified By: DCM Alexander A. Arvizu. Reason 1.4 (B,D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Prime Minister Thaksin has charged Royal Thai Army (RTA) commander General Sonthi Boonyaratglin with overall command of the security situation in the restive South, formally returning the Army to preeminence in that region. Many observers have hailed the appointment of Sonthi--himself a Muslim with experience in the South and a special forces background--as a move that should have been made months ago, but even Army supporters wonder what, if anything, this changes and if the military is up to the task. Indeed, in recent meetings in the South, Army officers detailed how poor morale, public distrust of the security forces and budgetary problems arising from the political crisis are hampering their work. End Summary.

THE ARMY IS BACK IN CHARGE

[1](#)2. (SBU) Local press reported on June 21 that caretaker Prime Minister Thaksin has asked Royal Thai Army (RTA) chief Gen Sonthi Boonyaratglin to serve as the point man for addressing the violent South. The move follows the wave of coordinated bombings on June 15-16 and the release of the National Reconciliation Commission's final report calling for changes in the RTG's southern policy (refs.) Public reaction to Thaksin's decision has been positive, with several academics telling reporters that the move should have been made months ago. Muslim leaders in the South have likewise characterized the appointment of Sonthi--himself a Muslim with years of experience serving in the South--as a step in the right direction.

[1](#)3. (C) Thaksin's decision brings RTG policy in the South full circle. The Army played the lead role in successful efforts to reduce separatism in the 1980s-90s, but was supplanted by the police in 2002, under Thaksin's orders. Many knowledgeable observers have pointed to this decision and the concurrent dissolution of the Army-led governance and security organizations--the Southern Border Administration Center (SBPAC) and Civil-Military-Police Task Force 43 (CMP-43)--as serious mistakes that aggravated the upsurge of separatist violence. In October 2004 Thaksin created the Southern Border Provinces Peace Building Command (SBPPBC)--with the commanding general of the 4th Army nominally in charge--which was supposed to act as a coordinating body for government agencies in the South. However, the SBPPBC, never given power over budgets or personnel, has proven to be largely ineffective as Thai

government agencies continued to often act independently. Sonthi has not publicly revealed what, if any, new moves he hopes to undertake with his new mandate. Local press has reported that the Army chief hopes to boost Army manpower in the South with the transfer of five more battalions to the region in the next few months.

OR HUNG OUT TO DRY?

14. (C) According to Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, a professor at Chulalongkorn University with close ties to the Army and palace, Sonthi himself is in the process of trying to figure out what's next. In a meeting with poloffs June 21, Dr. Panitan explained that Sonthi was--at that same hour--engaged in a series of discussions with his staff and other security officials over RTG policy in the South. Panitan, who has long advocated for the military to take overall responsibility for security in the South, questioned the sincerity of Thaksin's move. "Does he really care, or is he looking for a new scapegoat?" Is this a vote of confidence in Sonthi, or has Thaksin run out of people to "dump" the southern problem on? How much real, new authority does Sonthi have? According to Panitan, who counts among his students several up-and-comers in the security forces, Thaksin's administration of the southern problem is "becoming a joke" within the police and military. The police may be frustrated at taking a back-seat role to the Army once more, but their protector--Thaksin--is "on the ropes" politically. Moreover, the Royal Thai Police forces in the South are suffering from very low morale and have "exhausted their capabilities." According to Panitan, more and more police officers are asking for transfers out of the region.

15. (C) It is not clear to Panitan and others what Sonthi

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will, or can, do differently. Panitan is worried that the RTA chief may only tinker with the wiring diagram of security forces. According to Panitan, the RTG needs to have a serious internal debate on the way ahead in the South. The situation demands "better leadership," and that leadership must decide if this is a law enforcement or a counterinsurgency campaign. In Panitan's view, the tactics required by either are very different; the situation may even call for some areas to be administered differently. Either way, the security forces have to learn to cooperate more effectively, develop lessons learned and slow down the pace of rotations in and out of the South.

16. (C) Panitan--normally an avid booster for the military--appears seriously concerned about the ability of the Army to meet this challenge. He believes that the mishandling of the South illustrates the weakness of the security structure within the government. Even if Sonthi truly has the lead on Southern policy now, are he and the Army up to the task? Much has been made of the military's success against the communists in various parts of Thailand in the 1970s, but even the staunchly pro-Army Panitan wonders if today's Army is capable of recreating the success of the past. According to Panitan, the RTA was able to combine U.S. equipment and training with locally devised policy and tactics to crush the communist movement, but in the "last twenty years (the Army) has not used (its) head clearly." Finally, Panitan is worried that the military has not attracted the "best and brightest" in the last twenty years. They may be better than the police, "but the odds are against them."

MEANWHILE, ON THE GROUND IN THE SOUTH...

17. (C) In meetings with the 4th Army's 4th Development Division in the southern province of Songkhla 26-27 June, Army officers expressed to embassy officers serious concerns about the tensions between the ethnically Thai and ethnically

Malay communities. At a recent funeral for an ethnic Thai Buddhist who was shot, several people in attendance discussed taking matters into their own hands and retaliating. Echoing a common theme we have heard from police contacts, several Army officers asserted that most locals are caught in the middle, between the security forces and the insurgents. "They don't trust us, the police, or each other."

18. (C) The Development Division is itself a traditionally "static unit" that provides engineering, construction and other support to local communities in the South. It is not formally charged with security operations. Indeed, Development Division officers were very proud in stating that they have better relations with the locals than other security elements--and have not been attacked while engaged in construction or relief efforts. That said, elements of the 4th Division have been called upon to assist in providing security for government officials and teachers in the South. While we were meeting with the Army officers on June 27, a subordinate of one of our contacts was killed while escorting several teachers to work in Yala. When asked if they felt safe traveling alone in uniform through three southern provinces, the officers present responded with nervous laughs. They also refused to confirm or deny that more officers are asking for rotations out of the South, but admitted that unit morale is a serious problem.

19. (C) Several of the officers we spoke to had either grown up in the South and/or served there for many years already, but almost all were ethnically Thai Buddhists. One Muslim Colonel explained that almost 20 per cent of officers in the 4th Army area are fellow Muslims. The percentage of enlisted Muslims is higher, but the region still falls short of its recruitment goals. (Note. We have heard varying figures on the ethnic/religious mix of the 4th Army. It is not clear where the Colonel got these numbers from. End Note.)

110. (C) In private conversations following formal briefings, several officers expressed guarded optimism over some aspects of the situation in the South. Senior commanders appear to be increasingly focusing on civil affairs projects and efforts to build up goodwill with the local communities. That said, it will take "at least five years" before there is any chance of significant progress to halt the violence. Coordination with other units remains a serious problem as the history of competition between the military and police has hampered effective cooperation. Finally, the officers of the 4th Development Division are feeling the impact of the

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ongoing political crisis in Bangkok. The lack of a fully functional national government and concurrent operating budget has put several, important goodwill projects on hold.

COMMENT

111. (C) On its face, Thaksin's decision is an admission that the PM's 2002 decision to place responsibility for the South in the hands of the police--rather than the Army, which had enjoyed the lead role for decades--was in error. It is unclear, however, whether this move will lead to meaningful improvements in RTG policy and tactics or is merely a public gesture in response to the wave of bombings in the South earlier this month. Most knowledgeable observers have long maintained that entrusting more overall responsibility for southern security in the hands of the Army is a step in the right direction, although hardly a panacea for all the region's problems. Moreover, Sonthi is qualitatively a cut about most recent Thai Army commanders. That being said, the domestic political uncertainty in Bangkok hardly lends itself to the kind of leadership and interagency coordination that is sorely needed to make serious inroads in dealing with the southern militants. End Comment
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